Editorial and Symposium Introduction

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Laying the Ground for a Critical Psychology of Caste

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Abstract

The psychological underpinnings and processes of caste have remained obscure. This special issue of *Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* focusing on *Caste and Psychology* is an initial contribution that lays the ground for developing a critical psychology of caste. In this introductory article, I situate the special issue in the historical and contemporary context. I show that the historical roots of psychological approach to caste go deep. The revolutionary thinking and activism of Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar provided a useful foundation for a critical psychology of caste to flourish. Unfortunately, this foundation remained under-appreciated in the subsequent academic and social engagement on caste. Next, I review the contemporary research on the psychological dimension of caste and highlight emerging themes that illustrate contemporary approaches. I argue that there is need of a collective endeavor in the form of a new field of study, namely, 'critical psychology of caste', to integrate divergent perspectives and contributions addressing the psychological dimension of caste. The special issue is a small step in that direction.

Keywords

Caste, Race, Psychological Science, Dalit, Racism, Casteism, Decolonization, Ambedkar

Introduction

The caste system is one of the most complex and oppressive social orders existing on earth today. Expectedly, the scholarship on caste is vast and nuanced (for reviews, see Bapuji et al. 2024; Gupta 2005; Jodhka 2015; Mosse 2018). Despite the deeper insights offered by the extensive literature on caste, its psychological underpinnings and processes have remained obscure. Comparing caste with class in Great Britain and race in the United States, we find a theoretical and empirical vacuum concerning

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psychology. While there are scientific bodies of work addressing the psychology of class (Argyle 1994; Kraus & Stephens 2012; Manstead 2018) and the psychology of race (Richeson & Sommers 2016; Salter & Adams 2013), we are yet to turn our analytic gaze towards the psychology of caste. This special issue of *Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* focusing on *Caste and Psychology* is an initial contribution that lays the ground for developing a psychology of caste. The special issue takes a critical approach to address the relationship between caste and psychology and emphasizes the value of asking the right questions. Why must we take psychology seriously? Why must we ask the right questions in addressing the psychology of caste?

Psychology as a Form of Power

Psychology as a scientific discipline came into existence in the mid-19th century. Writing what came to be later known as the first textbook of psychology, pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James (1890) defined psychology as "the science of mental life, both of its phenomena and of their conditions" (James 1890: 26). While James agreed that mental phenomena such as cognitions, desires, feelings, decisions, memory, and the like are the core focus of psychology, he challenged the positions of spiritualist and associationist approaches that abstracted mental phenomena from their context. James argued that mental phenomena do not exist in a vacuum, but there are social conditions (including the human brain and physiology) under which they arise, function, and direct human behavior. The scope of psychology was thus construed as broad and included the antecedent conditions of mental phenomena and their resultant consequences. James (1890) emphasized that the psychologist's most interesting task is to engage in what he called "the quest of the conditions" (p.3). Over a century